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## WHEN MESS IS THE NORM: ENGAGING WITH CLASSROOM COMPLEXITIES

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Focusing on their teaching context, the authors describe what they identify as key components that make up their professional environment which is geared towards attaining high English language proficiency. In this self-reflection on their own teaching, they present insights gained in the process by pointing out some significant factors that are involved in the creation of classroom realities, namely, adaptivity, personalisation, agency, noticing, mediation, motivation and investment, while referring to literature in the field of language teaching and learning. The authors emphasise the importance of raising the students' awareness of the complex processes at work in the learning and teaching environment as a whole, which should help the students use their English language skills and competences in overcoming future challenges.

*Key words: self-reflection, classroom complexities, high language proficiency, mediation*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The three authors of this paper have accumulated a rather extensive quantity of experience as teachers of English. Experience can lead to a heightened sense of confidence: having mastered certain situations makes it easier to cope with new ones. However, amassed experience can also create apprehensions about the future. In particular, technological changes which have an impact on education may have reached a point where more significant pedagogical adjustments may be in order. This paper is thus an attempt to pause and take a moment to describe our teaching context in order to broaden our own outlook on issues that we find relevant in our present teaching practice and which we think might be relevant in the offing. By strengthening our own English language teaching practices, we hope to be able to assist the students

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more aptly with respect to their future needs. With the fast-paced societal changes as the backdrop for our considerations, we call on our experience and on applicable literature from the field of language learning and teaching, both general and specialist, so as to get a better handle on our teaching and learning realities – hoping also that other teachers might benefit from our considerations of the near future of English language teaching and learning at higher levels of proficiency.

We start by describing our teaching context. In the process, having realised that learning is messy by default, we put forward our views on how teachers can operate in today's classrooms. Frankly, it is the concerns which stemmed from our attitudes towards learning technologies that led us to this paper in the first place. Our views on the subject of future classroom dynamics, sundry as they may be, include concerns about the changing nature of teaching and learning. In *Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching*, Williams, Mercer and Ryan (2015) state the following: "It is important to reiterate that rather than providing any prescriptions about how to teach, we would like to encourage teachers to evaluate their own theories of teaching and learning, and consider what is appropriate in their own settings" (ibid.,: 21). The self-reflection that instigated and gave shape to this paper made us realise that teaching and learning contexts can today be described as "messy" – with and without advanced technologies – especially at higher levels of English language proficiency.

## **2. DESCRIPTION OF OUR TEACHING CONTEXT**

Many aspects of teaching and learning have changed since we started our professional careers. We have encountered varied pedagogical and technological trends. Currently, we are immersed in dwelling on ideas such as the very role of the teacher in today's classroom in connection with its various points of contact with the digital world. That teaching today is imbued with technology is a fact that cannot be ignored: about a decade ago it was possible to turn a blind eye to dictionaries on CD-ROM, smart boards, and the internet, but since then, smart phones alone have made it possible for students to carry the pooled digitalised knowledge of the whole world into the classroom – in their pockets. This is one of the moments that can make a teacher who was educated in a very different environment confused and apprehensive. Along these lines, writing about the so-called flipped classroom approach, Johnson and Marsh (2016: 61) state that "For many teachers, the classroom is no longer the familiar environment of their learning experiences, nor is it the familiar environment for which they have been trained." It is safe to assume that our concerns – regarding our technological prowess, the accompanying pedagogies, the contents of study programmes as well as the profiles of the actual class participants – are shared by our

colleagues – globally. In keeping up with developments in educational technology and the accompanying methodologies, it is important to keep in mind what the editor of *Blended Learning for Language Teaching* states with regard to the decisions that need to be made when designing such programmes: “What we stress throughout this book is that such decisions should be pedagogy-led rather than technology-led. We see the technology as facilitating pedagogy, not vice-versa” (McCarthy, 2016a: 3). We start our description with the segment that is closest to us: our roles as teachers.

### 2.1. *Teachers*

The three of us are language instructors who received their university education in the analogue era and we share a common educational background. As teachers, having had the opportunity to teach in a range of educational environments, we have tried our hand at the multiple stages of course design and implementation: our courses have spanned the whole range of proficiency levels, including both general English and ESP, with participants ranging from children to adults. We are currently employed as language instructors in the English department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences within the University of Split, Croatia, and this is the context that we focus on in this paper: we teach academic students of English who are being geared to become future teachers or translators and interpreters. We assist students during the whole course of their undergraduate and graduate studies in all five years of the programme – according to the Bologna system of three years of undergraduate programme plus two years of graduate studies. In our context, if the goal is to achieve a level of mastery that would exceed C2 – and that is the ideal goal for future translators and interpreters as well as for future teachers of English, we as teachers have an additional responsibility. Namely, since we are trying to educate a very specific group of students of English, we need to make sure that we set a good example by creating and fostering the habit of jointly reflecting on all the segments of the learning and teaching experiences.

It also needs to be kept in mind that, as similar as the three of us may be when it comes to our professional background, we are nevertheless different in terms of personality traits and individual identities. This fact can provide us with a wider perspective on the complexities of classroom situations in terms of group dynamics and the students’ language needs.

### 2.2. *Language*

The undergraduate and graduate courses we teach centre around training students to communicate in English – for their current academic and future professional purposes. Our daily focus is on language practice at advanced

levels. At such high levels, the academic setting obliges us to cover a range of types of English, from general to specialised, from everyday to professional. Furthermore, the English Language and Literature study programme mandates that we consider the language needs of students who are themselves to become teachers, translators, interpreters – in any case, proficient users who can exploit their mastery of the language to pursue their other goals. The language goals are thus intricate because of the complexity of student needs and also because of the complex nature of the English language, which is alive and constantly changing in relation to global socioeconomic and geopolitical trends.

Describing the complex nature of language learning and teaching in connection with educational technology, Thornbury states that “...the complexity of language, even of a lingua franca variety, is not in doubt, and materials or methods that focus almost exclusively on the teaching of grammar (as has often been the case) seriously under-represent this complexity” (2016: 28). The higher the language level, the more challenging it becomes to learn and to teach in order to accommodate the fluctuating exigencies of students and teachers in a complex study programme.

What also becomes more challenging is assessment: determining the levels of English language proficiency of our students in the context of constructivist teaching. In the 2018 *CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors*, in order to explain that language proficiency is a continuum that follows from meaning being constructed in interaction, the proficiency scales are compared to the colours of the rainbow: the borders are fuzzy, but we can still identify the dominant colours (Council of Europe, 2018: 34). Furthermore, the *Companion Volume* to CEFR states that “...the CEFR replaces the traditional model of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)...” (ibid.: 30). The model is replaced with a four-mode scheme of communicative activities and strategies: reception, production, interaction, and mediation, which “...is closer to real-life language use, which is grounded in interaction in which meaning is co-constructed” (ibid.: 30). Therefore, the *Companion Volume* to CEFR puts greater emphasis on the concept of mediation, already present in the 2001 CEFR, by developing a new set of descriptors to reflect the complexities of real-life communication which need to be acknowledged when furthering students’ language proficiency. All the while, the fluid nature of the processes of constructing meaning in interaction needs to be kept in mind when considering the approaches to learning and teaching contained in study programmes.

### 2.3. Programme

Our Faculty’s English programme at both undergraduate and graduate levels includes the study of both language and literature. Through extensive

reading of works pertaining to the field of literature, the students expand their English language knowledge and skills which are, in parallel, honed through linguistics courses as well as courses in teaching methodology. Also, as our Faculty offers double major undergraduate and graduate study programmes, all students in our department, alongside English, have to take another major. Currently, the available programmes are: Croatian Language and Literature, Italian Language and Literature, German Language and Literature, Pedagogy, Philosophy, History, and History of Art. On top of that, the graduate English study programme is divided into two programmes: teacher education, and translation and interpreting. Along with a range of elective courses covering both literature and linguistics, future teachers also take courses which include teaching methodology, and future translators and interpreters take courses which include translation theory and practice.

At both undergraduate and graduate levels, there are also Erasmus exchange students from a range of countries. In terms of practicalities, this means that the teaching and learning situation is then slightly more complicated because the educational systems in different countries do not necessarily fully overlap. This also goes for students from our Faculty who spend some time abroad as Erasmus exchange students and then resume their studies at our Faculty. We thus participate in educating both Croatian and sometimes international students of the English language. What is more, Erasmus students coming to our department are not exclusively studying to become teachers or translators and interpreters. Some of our courses are also open to Erasmus students who pursue other fields of study, for example, economics, political sciences, kinesiology or any other field for that matter.

All of the above does not preclude the opportunities for students of English language and literature enrolled at our Faculty as well as exchange students, to find employment in other professional niches. It would be difficult for us to predict the contexts in which our students will use English after they graduate. Whatever the case, the English language is likely to be their essential tool in building their professional careers.

#### **2.4. *Environment***

Generally, in Croatia, English is taught very early on in the context of primary education. Children also have the possibility to learn English in kindergarten. Additionally, throughout their formative years, they are exposed to the English language through the media of TV and films (largely not dubbed in Croatia), computer games and the internet. English is widely used in Croatian society also because of the tourist industry and general economy. It is safe to say that our current students have grown up immersed in a world of global English inside and outside the classroom.

Classrooms in themselves are units that encompass not only the spatial and temporal conditions for learning and teaching but also students and teachers who together form a complex habitat. It is important to perceive the university classroom as a meeting point in which teachers and students come together to pursue the study programme so that students as well as the society at large can benefit from the results of their efforts. The university classroom situation then fits within the general educational system: classrooms are also immersed in the wider higher learning institution, in our case, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences which is a component of the University of Split. In the previous subsection we listed some factors that influence the implementation of our study programme: students of both English language and literature, students with combinations of majors, exchange students, career prospects... Other factors may also be taken into consideration when describing our student pool, namely: age, gender, race, nationality... However, for the purposes of this paper, we will not dwell on these issues. Instead, we now describe our students' place in the complex university system in which we operate in terms of what may affect their English language proficiency.

## 2.5. *Students*

The students in our department have a story which is straightforward and simple on the surface: they have successfully completed their primary and secondary education, passing their final state *matura* examinations, obtaining results that are high enough to enable them to enter the study programme. Digging deeper, one can see that the layers of their skills and knowledge as well as their experiences differ greatly in terms of their knowledge of the world and strategies for coping with any task they might encounter. This may have to do with their extracurricular interests, their other majors and many other factors. There are also the varied levels of what is usefully referred to in the *CEFR Companion Volume* as the students' "cognitive sophistication" (Council of Europe, 2018: 53). The students can vary greatly in terms of their background (for example, social or cultural), as well as the previously mentioned categories such as age, gender or ethnicity. In particular, they vary in their levels of motivation and investment. The CEFR takes into account the fact that the students' personal differences have a significant bearing on the classroom situation.

The communicative activity of users/learners is affected not only by their knowledge, understanding and skills, but also by selfhood factors connected with their individual personalities, characterised by the attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles and personality types which contribute to their personal identity. (Council of Europe, 2001: 105)



It is thus also because of the students' personalities that the classroom situation is complex. It helps to visualise a group of more or less eager young people who bring to the table a whole range of their individual personalities – it is quite a crowd, not to mention the individual personalities of teachers who try to assist them as best as they can. The reality is that our study programmes and syllabuses are designed in advance, on the basis of our perceptions as to what a student of English language and literature ought to get from our syllabus design. It is always perplexing to see how the pre-designed syllabuses play out in the creative classroom.

### 3. HELPFUL INSIGHTS

We set out to clarify to ourselves what kinds of knowledge and skills the students of English need to get from us teachers during our time spent together in the English language practice classroom, following the study programme that has to be predesigned to meet their assumed needs as active members of society. In other words, what does the society expect teachers to do and what kinds of expectations do we as teachers have of ourselves? Wondering about what the English language teacher should know about the learners and about their particular context of language use, the authors of the CEFR list more than a dozen questions having to do with the responsibilities of teachers who wish to provide their learners with useful English language tools for their future, both as professionals and as responsible citizens. The CEFR, meant as providing a framework for learning, teaching and assessment, offers guidelines which teachers can then tailor to suit their particular contexts. The last two questions seem to be particularly significant in our previously described context – that of educating future teachers, translators, interpreters or language professionals in any other field:

- What can I give them that will be of lasting value, in whatever different ways their careers may later diverge?
- How can language learning best contribute to their personal and cultural development as responsible citizens in a pluralist democratic society? (Council of Europe, 2001: 44).

The following sections centre around what we have learned from reflecting on our teaching context. We focus on the factors in teaching and learning which we perceive as important for our teaching practice.

#### 3.1. *The classroom situation is messy*

The classroom today is a more multifaceted environment, no longer a secluded habitat in which students and teachers used to go about their business. We have mentioned the importance of recognising the range of varied profiles of students that are hopefully to benefit from our English study programme.

Moreover, teachers themselves bring their multiple identities to the mix, as they never cease to be learners, not to mention their other possible identities. Williams, Mercer and Ryan (2015) draw on Larsen-Freeman's approach to language learning situations as complex and dynamic systems to state that classroom reality is messy and that messiness is a factor to be reckoned with.

In respect to foreign language learning, Diane Larsen-Freeman has been central in encouraging professionals in the field to think of various aspects of language learning, such as learners, classrooms, and indeed the language itself, as complex, dynamic systems (Larsen-Freeman, 2012; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). She has emphasized that such a view is vitally important in engaging with the real-world complexity that teachers face in their daily lives in actual classrooms. In this way, complexity perspectives can be seen as paying attention to and engaging more deeply with reality, and recognizing the 'messiness' of real classrooms, learners, and teachers. (Williams et al., 2015: 18-19)

As hands-on teachers, we find the term 'messiness' very practical. The questions from the CEFR resonate with the concerns that we express in the description of our own teaching context. Again, it needs to be emphasised that while describing our context we do not discuss the practicalities of teaching and learning which concern the number of students enrolled, group sizes, timing, organisation and other such practical matters – which can also contribute to the overall messiness of what we as teachers have to deal with. Instead, we are more interested in how to be of use to students in the classroom against the backdrop of modern technology with which our lives and the lives of our students are imbued. Writing about blended learning, McCarthy describes the tensions between modern technology and pedagogy which intensify the already existing messiness of a classroom situation. In describing what the designers of virtual learning environments need to incorporate, McCarthy (2016a), in fact, provides a useful summary of what a beautifully humane classroom of today still has to offer.

Good classrooms are places where human beings collaborate and support each other, where expertise is shared in a humane environment, where pedagogical intervention can offer real shortcuts to knowledge and skill. They are places where teachers and learners react to one another in a moment-by-moment fashion as social animals. The computer and the internet have no such delicate feelings and, at the time of writing, operate dispassionately and with little regard to whether the user is feeling tired, has a headache, is daydreaming, is bored rigid or is struggling and really needs a great deal of sympathy as well as practical help and informational input. Such is the messy, all-too-human world of learning a language in the face-to-face classroom. This brings us squarely to the thorniest of our preoccupations: can the computer-mediated world of online study replicate either partly, wholly or not at all the interactive and sociable world of a good classroom lesson? (ibid.: 2)



This, indeed, remains our actual concern: how can we make sure that we will be of some use to our present and future tech-savvy students? At higher levels the situation gets even messier, that is to say, more complex, because students' English language proficiency is affected by their experiences accumulated individually over a course of time.

### 3.2. *The higher the level, the greater the mess*

In trying to describe our own context, we have referred to our background, our students' complex position in the university system, and the system at large. It is important to keep in mind what Greenier (2017) states about teacher education in the context of constructivist teaching: "...the successful implementation of constructivism is not necessarily about what teachers do or don't do in the classroom; it is about the approach they take towards learning, teaching and learning to teach" (ibid.: 273). When it comes to working with possible future teachers of English, Greenier's insight can be seen as especially significant. By making our students aware of the factors that contribute to the messiness of the milieu, we hope to encourage them, too, to reflect and to find relevance in them for their present and future English language-related endeavours. What we find helpful in attaining this goal is the concept of noticing.

Writing about ways of assessing the suitability of educational technologies, Thornbury (2016: 27) lists noticing as one of his twelve principles that can help in the selection of "...a teaching aid (tool, device, program, or whatever) in order to calculate its capacity for facilitating learning...". However, since his principles were created on the basis of analyses of existing theories on how people acquire a second language, we think that their re-purposed form, resulting in the twelve principles, can also be seen as applicable to teachers once again – looping thus from humans to technology and back. Thornbury posits the principle of noticing in the form of the following question: "Are there means whereby the user's attention is directed to features of the input so that their usefulness is highlighted?" (ibid.: 31).

It is, however, the question of what constitutes input that is very relevant: in our teaching context, we find incidental learning to be a prominent factor especially when it comes to noticing features of input at higher levels of language learning and teaching. According to McCarthy (2016b: 11), incidental learning "...may occur without intent." Our students have very likely been exposed to English since their kindergarten age or even earlier through exposure to various media. When discussing the complexity of the English language and the availability of resources, Thornbury (2016: 28) states that "...arguably, and thanks to the internet, opportunities for incidental learning have increased hugely...". The quantity of incidental learning has multiplied to the point where it would be really hard for us to identify the

sources as well as the volume and kind of input each individual student has been exposed to prior to and during our time together in the classroom. There are the standard sources that even analogue teachers are used to, such as song lyrics, films and books, as well as the more contemporary virtual types of input such as games or social media. The input may be related to English language and literature, but also to their other major, their hobbies and other interests. Incidental learning thus contributes to the overall complexity of teaching.

Ellis (2017) discusses incidental learning in the classroom, with teaching being perceiving as input that learners can benefit from. He points out that incidental learning through teaching input plays a major part in attaining higher levels of L2 language proficiency – which our students would need in order to engage in language teaching and translating in the future.

Even in instructed setting, therefore, much learning must be incidental if learners are to achieve high levels of L2 proficiency. This is why 'input' is such a central construct in all theories of L2 acquisition; it is primarily through exposure to input that incidental learning takes place. (ibid.: 80)

In our academic environment we need to keep in mind that our university students of English are at C1-C2 level. Incidental learning, which takes place over a number of years, can occur with or without the aid of technology, it can occur both in and outside the classroom, with and without a teacher. Understanding incidental learning both as classroom input and as exposure to a larger environment is important if we are to appreciate its impact. In order to help the students become more adept at noticing features of the input, the power of incidental learning needs to be recognised. Input may come from anywhere and it is the awareness of the ways of noticing features of the language that needs to be cultivated – in the classroom – so that the students can transfer the skills learned to their other real-life environments.

Another prominent factor when it comes to noticing is the hidden curriculum. An awareness of the concept of the hidden curriculum both on the part of the students and their teachers can help in understanding the complexities of higher level language learning. In *Ideology and Curriculum*, Apple (2004) explains the hidden curriculum in schools as "...the tacit teaching to students of norms, values, and dispositions that goes on simply by their living in and coping with the institutional expectations and routines of schools day in and day out for a number of years" (ibid.: 13). At higher levels of language proficiency, the students also ought to have developed their critical skills, which then allows them to understand how societal systems work. Societies and their institutions come with implicit norms. It may also happen that we as teachers unknowingly impose our own sets of values. Bringing the hidden curriculum out in the open, that is, raising our

own awareness as well as the awareness of our students, future teachers and mediators in the context of language use, can produce valuable outcomes.

In our context, we as teachers of the English language have a great degree of freedom when it comes to selecting content material for a prescribed curriculum. With the selection of content a teacher can impose his or her agenda or world view. When the teachers involve the students in the selection of content, the effects of hidden curriculum can be accounted for. Students could also be encouraged to select content material in English pertaining to their other major to be used in English language practice classes: in this way the material becomes more relevant as the students' sense of agency is cultivated. If we make our students – future teachers – aware of possible hidden curricula, chances are that they as future teachers will approach their students in the same way. Incidental learning and what is absorbed through exposure to the hidden curriculum therefore contribute to the complex functioning of a classroom, particularly at higher levels of English language proficiency where noticing becomes crucial.

A useful study was carried out by Lerner and Poe (2014: 43-63) who looked into how a group of students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) perceived communicating science and how they changed in the course of the three years in which the researchers followed the students as they developed their student identities into professional identities to become communicators of science, aware of the rhetorical situation and discourse practices. The researchers looked at communication-intensive (CI) classes and established that "...in early CI classes – classes taken in the first or second year of college – most students saw communicating science as merely the translation of sound scientific findings rather than a rhetorical/persuasive act situated in particular contexts" (ibid.: 45). This kind of what is referred to in the CEFR as "cognitive sophistication" (Council of Europe, 2018: 53) arrived at by the students through time and effort is also needed for understanding aspects of the classroom situation. What our students can benefit from is the mutual awareness of the factors that shape the processes of teaching and learning.

In the following section, we look at another contributing factor: the affordances of learning technologies which require teachers to assume varied roles by adapting to the exigencies of the students.

#### **4. WHAT IS IN THE OFFING**

In the classroom, as social beings, teachers and students communicate and together learn to collaborate in order to achieve their language learning and teaching goals. As already stated, our future students may come with an educational background which is different from ours: more reliant on educational technologies. They will also need to know their way around

technologised environments in which they may find employment. Given the applicability and availability of learning technologies, we surely have to wonder about whether we, old-school teachers, can coexist with machines. The fact is that we are already working together with them, that is, relying on educational technologies to a certain extent. They enter the teaching and learning situations in many ways and forms, such as different types of blended learning or content and language integrated learning (CLIL). These forms of learning can be helpful when it comes to introducing order into the messy classroom environment. They can offer ways of adapting to more particular circumstances of students and teachers. On the other hand, they can also be seen as contributing to the mess that is the classroom: adding more balls to juggle. Still, this is a good thing given that complexity appears to be the norm.

In the classroom environment it is vital for there to be someone who will be adaptable and sensitive enough to students' needs in order to make the process of learning more efficient. Bannister and Wilden (2013) describe the role of the teacher in the context of promoting sound use of tablets and apps in schools. They point out how teachers can be seen as facilitators when technology is used in the classroom to accommodate the students' needs and what kind of guidance might be needed in such contexts.

The teacher is more likely to have the role of facilitator during a lesson. This might be a new role for a teacher more used to teaching a lesson from the front of the class and inputting language for the students to use. While there may well be stages in the lesson when this is inappropriate, when the students are engaged in project and collaborative learning on a tablet, the teacher may need to take a less active role. In these stages the teacher will be required to monitor, give advice and guide the students so they can work towards the learning outcome. (ibid.: 20)

This shift from active to relatively passive may be hard for some teachers. However, this shift also means that students thus become more active – as users of technology. As responsible members of future societies, however, they have to display a considerable sense of agency. The same goes for their teachers – a tough act to follow for their machine counterparts.

To go back to our initial dilemmas as to what teachers and classrooms are for these days: having realised the advantages of the classroom complexities, we now present some interpersonal elements that we as teachers feel we should be more aware of as they give direction to our teaching context.

#### ***4.1. Adaptivity, personalisation, and agency***

Previously, we looked into Thornbury's principle of noticing in relation to educational technologies. We concluded that the principles that were

extrapolated from second language acquisition theories to begin with, can be reapplied to human teachers, enriched for having been considered through the lens of using educational technologies. This loop gave us a new appreciation of the notion of noticing in our technologised present which, on account of the quantity of information, also makes Thornbury's considerations of the principles of adaptivity and personalisation a necessity and a challenge. Although all of the principles carry great weight, we draw attention to the fact that he lists adaptivity as his first principle. Here he posits the following question: "Does the tool accommodate the non-linear, unpredictable, incidental and idiosyncratic nature of learning, e.g., by allowing the users to set their own learning paths and goals?" (Thornbury, 2016: 31).

We have found it useful to break down this question into segments. Firstly, it states that learning is non-linear: this gives rise to the need for teachers and students to redo a lot of stages through revising, redefining, recycling, explaining again, as well as through giving and doing homework. Learning is also unpredictable: it can depend on so many factors, comprised under the umbrella of teacher and student agency as well as that of affordances, and many other "umbrellas" that cover the ever changing teaching and learning contexts. Learning is incidental: it is not always planned, and the magnitude of incidental learning becomes more evident at higher levels of proficiency, as stated previously. Learning is also idiosyncratic: now the real challenge lies in having to adapt to the idiosyncrasies of, for example, more than ten students in a classroom. When it comes to adapting to individual students, that is, their multiple identities, adaptivity is closely related to Thornbury's eleventh principle that has to do with teaching aids and personalisation: "Does the tool encourage the user to form strong personal associations with the material?" (ibid.: 32). The students find content meaningful for reasons that may involve factors such as motivation and investment. Again, going the full loop, looking at the principle derived from observations of human SLA as it applies not only to technology but once again to humans might provide a helpful insight when it comes to the direction in which our profession is headed.

Before we tackle students' personal investment in input in general, at this point we are interested in the effects that using technology to personalise teaching can have on teachers and students. Writing about adaptive learning systems, that is, technologies that aim to adapt to the students' needs, in the context of blended learning, San Pedro and Baker (2016: 242) state that blended learning can offer a chance of supporting "...better personalisation in a student's learning experiences." They state the advantages of such learning systems.

By adapting to student attributes during learning tasks, these systems are able to support students that come to class with different prior knowledge, adjust the difficulty of learning activities dynamically, provide motivational or affective support to students and help students develop better self-regulated learning skills. (ibid.: 242)

They also look into some drawbacks when it comes to adaptivity of learning systems, in terms of personalising instruction.

One interesting limitation to the current generation of adaptive learning systems is that with a few exceptions (such as Affective AutoTutor, for instance), most existing systems adapt to a single dimension of the learner, in a single way. Individual systems become very effective at using mastery learning, or at providing feedback when students make known errors, and perhaps giving messages as to why the student is wrong, but the full combination of support for problem selection, misconceptions, affect, motivation, disengaged behaviour and self-regulated learning is relatively rare. (ibid.: 242-243)

In the context of constructivist teaching, it is clear how many challenges still lie ahead. San Pedro and Baker state the importance of embracing the students' multiple characteristics: "...we envision and hope that the adaptive learning systems of the future will consider the student in a richer, more multi-dimensional fashion." (ibid.: 243). As we have stated in our description of the students we interact with, at higher levels of proficiency this is a hard feat for any teacher, and this kind of adaptivity requires a lot of sensitivity and affective strain. When it comes to learning technologies, big data can help in describing the learners in more detail, according to San Pedro and Baker.

As we get more and richer data on learners, we will be able to improve the quality of our models and make more differentiated assessments of how individual learners can be supported. We will be able to evaluate not just what works in general, but what works for very specific subcategories of students, in very specific situations. (ibid.: 243)

However, using such large amounts of data efficiently presents a considerable challenge. This can also, perhaps, help dispel one of our major concerns at the moment – for the moment: that of English teachers, and their students who are being trained to become English teachers or translators, being replaced by "digital tutors" or "digital translators", since learning technologies, apparently, still have a way to go in this direction. At the moment, the teacher still streamlines the technologies involved, in blended learning, for example. However, our initial concerns may seem superficial when considered from the point of view that big data has already changed the teaching game. Writing about learning analytics in online language learning, Thomas, Reinders and Gelan (2017) consider the purpose of



learning analytics and its application in education. We find that their insights quoted below illustrate some broader ways of looking at our teaching and learning situation.

Learners themselves may be able to engage in more reflective learning practices based on access to real-time data about their patterns of activity. A data-driven approach may help course developers to create a case for pedagogical and institutional change. On the other hand, it is also necessary to have more studies investigating the factors influencing resistance to analytics, increased surveillance, and threats to privacy. (ibid.: 199)

However, the goal for our time spent in the classroom remains that of considering classrooms as communities, as accentuated by Williams, Mercer and Ryan (2015).

Conceiving of our classrooms as communities can be useful in transforming how we think of teaching – not as the imparting of knowledge in a top-down fashion, but rather as a social process which highlights the role of communication and interaction and the nature and quality of the relationships within the community. Thinking of our classrooms in this way challenges us as teachers to democratise our learning environments by enabling learners to become active participants. (ibid: 28)

It is one of our goals as teachers to recognise this portion of the big picture and, by adapting to it, to make our students aware of the need to participate actively in the educational processes. The CEFR “...views users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents’, i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action” (Council of Europe, 2001: 9). This aspect of our students’ identities should be considered when discussing the notion of agency. Exploring learner agency, Mercer (2012: 44) points out the complexity of agency as a dynamic system: “...learner agency appears to emerge from the interaction of several factors such as self-concept, beliefs, motivation, affect and self-regulation.” Here it needs to be restated that the classroom situation is messy by default. Cultivating a sense of agency is also particularly demanding since, for Mercer (ibid.: 44), “...there is not one single component which causes the learner to exercise her agency in a certain way, but rather it appears to emerge from a series of multiple, interconnected causes which can interact in unpredictable ways and can vary in their relative significance.” Both students’ and teachers’ multiple identities need to be taken into account to make sure that the time spent in the classroom is relevant and meaningful. This can be achieved when there is an awareness of the need to adapt to the classroom situation – with or without technology – while nourishing the sense of agency of all those involved in the process.

Exploring mediation as a mode of communication that guarantees engagement in adapting, personalising and nourishing a sense of agency is discussed below in connection with the concepts of motivation and investment.

#### **4.2. *Mediation, motivation, and investment***

As already mentioned in the description of our teaching context, mediation is one of the four modes of communication which are interrelated (Council of Europe, 2018: 30). The term mediation can also be used to represent a teacher's willingness to adapt to various factors involved in the production of meaning that is socially constructed. In *Psychology for Language Teachers*, Williams and Burden (1997) explain the role of teachers as mediators in a way that clearly illustrates the challenges that mediation poses.

First, mediation must be concerned with empowering, with helping learners to acquire the knowledge, skills, and strategies they will need in order to progress, to learn more, to tackle problems, to function effectively in a particular culture and the changing society, and to meet new, emerging and unpredictable demands. It is also concerned with helping learners to become autonomous, to take control of their own learning, with the fundamental aim of enabling them to become independent thinkers and problem-solvers. (ibid.: 68)

Keeping in mind the element of complexity in teaching and learning, this is quite a challenge since the affective component of teaching and learning is very pronounced in the process. At higher levels of language proficiency in particular, mediation requires careful negotiation and sophisticated interpersonal skills. For example, detecting shades of meaning and responding to affective undertones plays an important part in communication. In the *CEFR Companion Volume*, it is emphasised that affective processes need to be recognised and explored in mediation activities.

A person who engages in mediation activity needs to have sufficient empathy for the viewpoints and emotional states of other participants in the communicative situation. The term mediation is also used to describe a *social and cultural process* of creating conditions for communication and cooperation, facing and hopefully defusing any delicate situations and tension that may arise. (Council of Europe, 2018: 106)

The teacher as mediator adapts to the messy non-linear requirements of the situation. Adaptivity is, in this sense, a part of mediation processes. Teachers adapt to immediate circumstances, they adapt their syllabus to both the long-term and immediate needs of their students, and their language as well. Teachers also teach students – by example – how to be adaptable themselves.

Hence, in our teaching context, what this self-reflection has taught us is that we should devote more energy to the issue of motivation. This can be done by rethinking and reenergising some of the tasks we already do by mediating their importance through careful negotiation. Teachers can help motivate the impatient students so that they can appreciate the activities by highlighting the benefits that will come from the work deemed necessary by the teacher – which the students may find daunting, boring or even offensive. Discussing motivation, Williams, Mercer and Ryan (2015) elucidate this very important role of language teachers.

If learners understand these activities as being connected to outcomes that they value, that are internally valid, then they are more likely to make sustained efforts towards such ends. It is important, therefore, that teachers explain the purpose of the activities they present so that rather than simply carrying out tasks because the teacher tells them to, learners approach tasks with clear aims in mind. (ibid.: 107)

Along with motivation, investment as a related notion also warrants our attention. Considering the changing approaches to language learners and their multiple identities, Norton (2017: 14) explains the concept of investment “...as a sociological complement to the psychological construct of motivation.” Writing about educational programmes for English teachers, she states what we believe teachers should have as a goal.

...English teacher education programmes are encouraged to provide language teachers with greater opportunities to explore language as both a linguistic system and a social practice. Such programmes should encourage teachers to harness the social, cultural, and linguistic capital that language learners already possess, and to better understand their hopes for the future. (ibid.: 25)

To put it in another way – according to the CEFR, students’ general as well as their communicative language competences should be cultivated (Council of Europe, 2001: 9). In that way, both motivation and investment can be tapped more easily.

In the context of CLIL, Ball, Kelly and Clegg (2015) present a view of the uncertainties that the future of learning and teaching brings:

How can we educate children for the future when we cannot even predict what they will be doing in ten years’ time? All that we can predict for certain is that the skills needed by the present generation of children will be fundamentally different from those that we have valued and nurtured for so long. (ibid.: 271)

In his study of the motivational development and academic decisions made by Chinese and international students of English at two universities in China, Doyle (2017) relied on Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System as a framework to analyse why Chinese and international students decided to get a degree in English and what affected their motivation.

Despite their contrasting orientations, both Chinese and international students experienced motivational struggles due in part to a negative view of the English major and related career misgivings. These factors figured prominently in students' choice of major and subsequent L2 Self development, and they appear to be directly linked to current linguistic and economic trends in East Asia. (ibid.: 70).

With an awareness of the importance of exploring students' multiple identities, Doyle points at the importance of helping students develop their L2 Self: "Helping students create and strengthen their L2 Self through targeted visualisation training is a motivational strategy that all language teachers can use" (ibid.: 71). Along these lines, Lerner and Poe (2014) in their aforementioned study involving students of science at MIT also find, using a different methodological approach, that "...students who showed an emerging professional identity could better project how writing might play a role in their future professional lives, such as in writing a grant proposal to the National Institutes of Health" (ibid.: 45).

Given the uncertain job prospects in our Croatian context, the availability of such studies is very motivational for us as teachers. Our students who are majoring in English need to be motivated enough to develop as language professionals who are aware of the requirements placed upon good communicators in any field, no matter what the future may bring. Since we are able to learn about research from across the world and since some of teachers' as well as students' concerns are shared globally, we can benefit from reading about other perspectives. They offer comfort and help us search for common theoretical and practical ground. Discussing the role of language teachers in changing contexts in connection with blended learning, Comas-Quinn (2016) points out that there are now greater possibilities for sharing teachers' stories: "This increased exposure to the experiences of others should encourage teachers to become more engaged in examining, reflecting on and evaluating their own practice" (ibid.: 77). All the while, however, it is also the students' stories that help shape teachers' experiences, as indicated by Lerner and Poe (2014).

Ultimately, we see a continuing need to better understand student learning through *students'* perspectives. In the current era of outcomes assessment and the push to quantify student learning, we need to remind ourselves continually of the importance of students' stories of learning and becoming. (ibid.: 60)

The bottom line is that we feel that it is our job as teachers to engage in meaningful mediation by spending more time talking with students about which content they need and why, and how they can select it and make the best use of it. By doing so, we can strengthen their motivation and encourage

their investment in the hope of seeing them through to a future they will have envisaged for themselves.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Having described our teaching context: the way we as teachers together with our students function in the English language within the larger educational system, and having reflected on ideas expressed in both general and specialist English teaching and learning literature, we have gained more insight into our specific classroom-based concerns. Having realised that the classroom is indeed a complex, messy place and that the higher the language level, the more complex the classroom work-related issues become, we have expressed our views on what we find to be of immediate and continuous practical concern to us and, by extension, to other colleagues – with or without the use of technology. We have also pointed out some ways of considering the varied personalities and roles of students and teachers. Consequently, we now have a better appreciation of the challengingly humane mess in which we function daily: what we perceive as our main goal is raising our own awareness as well as the awareness of our students – future teachers, translators, interpreters or English language communicators in any shape or form – regarding aspects of the complex classroom situation at higher levels of English language study presented in this paper.

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## KAOS KAO PRIRODNO STANJE: BAVIMO SE SLOŽENOŠĆU RADA U NASTAVI

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Ključne riječi: *razmatranje vlastite nastavničke prakse, složenost rada u nastavi, visoka razina poznavanja jezika, posredovanje*